



MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor and City Council

THRU: Christopher Shorter, Assistant City Manager

FROM: Kimberly McNeeley, CPRP, Director
Austin Parks and Recreation Department

DATE: 04/24/2020

SUBJECT: Modified Park System Operations

This memo serves to provide information regarding COVID-19 related park system operational modifications and the executed actions to inform the public of the temporary modifications. The Parks and Recreation Department (PARD) works collaboratively with Austin Public Health Department, the Equity Office, established Health Authorities and City leadership to regularly review available data and consider situational knowledge associated with the spread of COVID-19. Difficult decisions were made and will continue to be made based upon available data and situational understanding at the time of the deliberation.

Operational Modifications

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, park green space and trails have remained open for activities like walking, hiking, jogging or biking. Park system permanent restrooms and water fountains remain open. While all park patrons are welcome to use restrooms and water fountains these resources remain open specifically to support individuals experiencing homelessness. Based upon the available information, PARD incrementally closed park system facilities and amenities, established support service operations at strategic PARD locations and implemented operational modifications. These decisions were made to promote increased physical/social distancing and contain the spread of the virus. Below is a summary of the modifications:

During the week of March 16th, PARD closed:

- Recreation Centers
- All Cultural Centers
- All Museums
- All Senior Centers
- All Aquatic Facilities
- All Tennis Centers
- Zilker Botanical Garden
- Zilker Caretaker House
- Old Bakery & Emporium
- Mayfield Cottage, Park and Preserve
- Emma Long Park Campsites

Immediately following facility closure, PARD established support service operations including three facilities to provide City of Austin essential employees childcare for youth 5 years and older, five facilities to provide controlled access to showers for individuals experiencing homelessness and multiple food/meal distribution sites for eligible senior citizen clients.

In early April, PARD closed all park amenities including but not limited to:

- Playgrounds
- Exercise equipment
- Pavilions
- Basketball courts
- Tennis courts
- Skateparks
- Barking Springs/Spillway below Barton Springs Pool

Golf Course operations were originally closed; however, based upon the April 11, 2020 Attorney General's clarification of Governor's Orders GA-14, golf courses opened to allow for walking only course play via remote tee-time scheduling. All golf course facilities and amenities are closed.

Historically, Easter Weekend is one of the highest park system utilization weekends and in an attempt to discourage social gatherings, PARD closed the park system from sunset April 9th through sunrise April 13th. This closure resulted in a dramatic decrease in park users and no known large gatherings.

Following the Easter weekend closures and to further encourage physical/social distancing, on April 14th, PARD began limiting available parking at downtown parks, district parks and neighborhood parks. The rationale being that less parking access will theoretically decrease the number of individuals within a park space at any given time. Based upon Park Ranger patrol observations, this measure appears to have slightly decreased park usage.

Also beginning the week of April 14th, PARD coordinated with The Trail Foundation to transition the Ann and Roy Butler Hike and Bike Trail to one way, ensuring reasonable accommodations for multi-directional travel for individuals with mobility challenges. After a week of transition, PARD estimates between 80% and 85% directional compliance.

Parks closure information can be found at www.austintexas.gov/parkclosures.

Communications/Notifications

With each incremental operational modification, PARD executed both general communication strategies and specific targeted strategies to inform park patrons and gain voluntary compliance. Strategies are outlined below:

- Operational changes were communicated via press releases, regular web page and social media updates, including but not limited to facility closures, amenity closures during Easter weekend, and Ann and Roy Butler Hike and Bike Trail directional modifications.
- Facility closure signs are visible on facility doors and at targeted locations a staff member is stationed to respond to inquiries.
- Closure signs have been installed (and reinstalled) throughout the park system indicating facility/amenity closures. Caution tape was used to discourage access, but caution tape was found to be ineffective.
- Orange fencing and signage has been used to block access to specific park amenities like courts and exercise equipment.
- Social distancing signs have been installed (and reinstalled) throughout the park system to remind patrons about social distancing.
- Park Rangers patrol the park system daily and provide reports to the PARD Executive Team regarding high usage parks, group gatherings, patron contacts and voluntary compliance with social distancing and other park rules. This information is used to coordinate future daily patrols or reassign park monitors.
- Social distancing and Easter weekend closure flyers were distributed to individual park patrons during Park Ranger patrols.
- PARD Executive Team members, Park Rangers and Givens community members walked Givens Park prior to the Easter Weekend closure to discuss social distancing, recommended actions to prevent the spread of the virus and to listen to patron concerns.
- Barricades and signage have been installed to indicate reduced parking lot access at key locations.

- Park Monitors have been assigned to specific park locations to assist with educating park patrons regarding social distancing, amenity closures and to assist with park access for individuals with mobility challenges.
- PARD staff joined community members the weekend of April 18th and 19th at Givens Park to provide resource information, masks and gloves.
- In partnership with the Trail Foundation, Ann and Roy Butler Hike and Bike Trail directional signage was installed and PARD Park Rangers regularly patrol the trail.
- Tennis and volleyball court nets have been removed throughout the park system.

While it is difficult to gain voluntary rule compliance throughout the entire park system, in recent days, PARD has been encouraged by its observations. The Park Monitor program in combination with the orange fencing has effectively decreased visitation at the Barton Creek Spillway. The Ann and Roy Butler Hike and Bike Trail has an estimated 80% to 85% directional compliance. Thanks to the community's efforts, individuals at Givens Park have been observed adhering to social distancing and wearing face masks. The Parks and Recreation Department will continue to collaborate with the Austin Health Department, the Equity Office, established Health Authorities and City leadership to consider any additional operational modifications. PARD will be especially thoughtful as the Department looks ahead to establishing strategic and safe ways to incrementally resume operations.

Should you require further clarification, please feel free to reach out to me by email at Kimberly.Mcneeley@austintexas.gov or by phone at 512-974-6717.